



THE NAVAJO NATION

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JONATHAN NEZ VICE PRESIDENT

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BUILDING COMMUNITIES OF HOPE TOUR KICKS OFF AT THOREAU HIGH SCHOOL



High rates of suicide across Native America and the Navajo Nation have warranted OPVP to address the epidemic by organizing the *Building Communities of Hope* tour. At Thoreau High School, Vice President Nez reinforced that the students are loved and important.

THOREAU-The Building Communities of Hope Tour, which is an initiative undertaken by the Office of the President and Vice President (OPVP) and departments of the Executive branch, kicked off a six-day tour on Monday, Dec. 14 at Thoreau High School. The tour aims to bring suicide prevention awareness to schools and communities across the Navajo Nation.

As high rates of suicide across Native America and the Navajo Nation indicate, suicide is an epidemic that warrants immediate attention. OPVP has taken measures to address this epidemic through organizing the Building Communities of Hope Tour.

"Our youth will lead us into the future. We must do everything we can to let them know they are special and they are loved. We need to protect our youth and continue to instill positivity and self-confidence in them," said President Russell Begaye.

As the tour got underway at Thoreau High School, Vice President Nez said. "In this six-day tour, we are hitting the road to show the Navajo people that we mean business. One life taken is one life too many in our eyes."

Jessie McKenzie and TJ Anderson of the Department of Behavioral Health Service (DBHS) led the program with a presentation addressing questions and answers about suicide prevention and awareness.

McKenzie posed a direct question, "Are you thinking about hurting yourself or killing yourself?"

She went on to tell the students that if they are hurting, they really need to voice their pain and talk with someone they trust or feel they can confide in.

"Don't be afraid to ask questions," she said. "Speak up, reach out and know that you are not alone. Seek help from an adult you trust and don't give up. Keep asking until someone helps you."

Both McKenzie and Anderson recommended that the affected youth should speak with teachers, school counselors, nurses, parents or friends. In critical situations, those who are considering suicide, and those who know someone that might be considering suicide, should call the nearest Navajo Nation Police Department dispatch and provide adequate information.

Echohawk Lefthand, a motivational speaker from Red Mesa, said that suicide has been a big problem in the area where he comes



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The gymnasium at Thoreau High school was filled with students and administrative faculty along with staff from presenting departments.

from. Suicide is a permanent solution to a temporary problem, he told the students.

"We all go through problems and we all face difficult situations in our lives," he said. "When we take difficult situations and turn them into positive things, we are able to grow through them."

Lefthand shared that within the last two months, he lost one of his best friends to suicide. His friend was a positive person who had great charisma. He wasn't someone who seemed like he would consider suicide.

"He told me that he had been thinking about suicide and I couldn't believe it," he said. "I asked him, 'How can you think like this?'"

Ultimately Lefthand's friend took his own life, which in turn caused Lefthand to fall into depression. The impacts of suicide among the victim's family and friends can be lingering, deep-rooted and traumatic.

The tour's presentation included support and counseling services for those who have lost loved ones. Lefthand talked about his need to seek counseling in dealing with the grief he was feeling. Resources are available and were part of the topics discussed.

"The only way to get over depression is to go through it. You're going to cry but you have to go through it," he said.

Dominic Romero, Head Principal at Thoreau High School, said the Building Communities of Hope tour was of critical importance as it let the students know that the Navajo Nation cares about them and that their lives are truly special.

"This is huge and it's important because we don't know what a lot of these kids go through with their families. Even though they might not be suicidal, possibly someone in their family has been affected by suicide. Bringing in the Navajo Nation and other Native Americans to talk about it is a huge part of awareness. Being able to have a child come in and talk with somebody is vital and it will save a life," said Principal Romero.

Organizer of the tour and Executive Assistant with OPVP, Yvonne Kee Billison said the numbers of suicides on the Navajo Nation are high and the OPVP hopes to affect these numbers by bringing them down.

"We are going to need everyone's help to do this," she said. "This



Vice President Jonathan Nez (center) stands with Building Communities of Hope tour presenters and staff from supporting departments.



OPVP Executive Staff Assistant and organizer of the tour, Yvonne Kee Billison said the subject of suicide is a tough one but a dialogue needs to start to combat it.

is a really tough subject and it impacts all of us. However, we all have choices and through outreach and available resources, we can make everything better for ourselves."

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